

IN MEMORIAM  
KAROL JAKUBOWICZ JO BARDOEL



Photo Borut Peterlin / Mladina

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The first time I ever met Karol Jakubowicz has been at the IAMCR Conference in 1978, exactly 35 years ago, in his own home town, Warsaw. I remember that I, as always, took pictures of him and other Dutch and international colleagues at the dinners and receptions during the conference. The rest of us were still young and playful in those days, except Karol who seemed the only grown-up among us. Strange that when I compare that time with later memories and pictures it's clear that everyone got older except for Karol. In my memory he always remained the same – always grown-up and seemingly ageless. I did not realise that Karol was already 72 years old, although that is much too young to pass away.

Once you had met Karol, you would never forget him. The combination of a quite overwhelming physical appearance with a gentle, humorous and self-critical personality was striking. His kind, witty and relativistic approach to everything, twinkling eyes behind big, mostly tinted glasses, reminded me of more people I have learned to know in my lifetime who also had to live in and survive autocratic regimes – ranging from Communism to the Catholic Church. Personally I have only experience with the Catholic Church, but in the Polish case it was, I am afraid, both.

For a long time I met Karol only occasionally. He was the renowned expert on Polish media and represented that big country from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Karol combined, or went back and forth, between academia, media practice and policy making in the context of mainly national broadcasting, as I would also do later in my professional life.

In the post-communist era, from the 1990's on, we met Karol more often and at a broader range of occasions. First he was the best and inevitable expert on media in Eastern Europe, particularly broadcasting. He always kept a critical distance on the transformation from authoritarian and state-controlled broadcasting to public service media, for which he was also a critical but passionate voice. Karol remained a critical observer who sharply criticised the sudden shift from state broadcasting to the market mania that took over in many Central and Eastern European countries, including his own. He was especially critical about the frequent abuse of the term 'public' or 'public broadcasting' when so many of those claiming that identity were, in fact, still obedient to and instrumental for the government of the day. When Hallin and Mancini conceived their well-known threefold typology of the relations between media and politics in most European and North-American countries, roughly ten years ago, I remember that Karol criticised them, as well, for the lack of attention to the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time he remarked that the situation there was quite comparable to that of young democracies in Southern European countries that also suffered from traditions of political control and clientelism, which Hallin and Mancini labelled as the Mediterranean or Polarised-Pluralist model. Karol himself deeply believed in the ideal and practice of a media and broadcasting system that serves the public interest above all, and which performs in a Habermasian sense as a truly independent entity, at arm's length from both the state and the market.

Especially over the last decade Karol developed from the preferred media expert and academic from Central Europe to become a leading academic and acknowledged expert on public broadcasting and media on the European continent overall. His broad background as a journalist, media manager and supervisor, combined with accomplishments as a prominent researcher and scholar in this field, account

for the broad range of circles that appreciated his expertise. Over the last ten years I met Karol not only at IAMCR, ECREA and RIPE conferences, but also at numerous meetings in the context of the European Broadcasting Union, the European Union, the Council of Europe, UNESCO and other international organisations. He was also irreplaceable in EURICOM colloquia since the very beginning. Karol could have made life easier on himself. Most often he was an invited speaker, typically in a keynote role, and he was invited so often because he always had something important to say.

I remember once that after a nice dinner in Amsterdam I invited Karol to go for a drink. I think it was for the RIPE@2006 conference that I organised together with Gregory Ferrell Lowe, although it could have been in the period when he was a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam. Whenever the occurrence, Karol responded with thanks but declined because he had to finalise his presentation that still contained over 30 pages of text and 50 Powerpoint slides. Karol was always busy, always working, and always productive. He was, in my experience, a man devoted to serious work and not a fan of small talk. I'm not sure how he managed to do accomplish the feat, but he seemed to have read everything that might be relevant to the understanding, development and future of public service broadcasting in Europe, both from an institutional point of view and from an academic perspective.

After hearing one of his speeches people were always impressed by Karol's grand overviews, elegant syntheses and insightful typologies of the subject matter. He had a great gift for this and was able to perform in a way that sometimes reminded me of that other master of synthesis, Denis McQuail. Like Denis, Karol had a keen eye for the major transformations that public service broadcasting had to undergo, a process that required, as he called it and not forgetting his Polish origin, a 'Copernican revolution.' He understood earlier than most that as a result of new technologies and a very different attitude about media, and given the growing requirement to interact directly with the public, that legitimisation of public service media was the essential priority today. He was convinced that public service broadcasting must become public service media and develop far beyond the paternalism of the past.

Karol was a deep thinker and an informed expert. That's why he was asked not only to provide numerous keynote speeches at scholarly conferences and forums, but also to provide expert testimony and policy recommendations for many commissions and think tanks that have been instrumental in bringing about that Copernican revolution in public service media. Karol had a vision and was a leading light in a process that continues. As such he was invited to serve as a member of the EBU Digital Strategies Group, chaired by Christian Nissen, where formative work was accomplished in rethinking what public service means in media and for the public in the 21st century. And Karol himself chaired the Steering Commission on Media and New Communication Services of the Council of Europe. He authored and contributed to a raft of policy documents that are still essential reading.

With all of that in mind, it's no wonder that I did not first hear the sad news of his passing away from my good friend Greg Lowe or from one of the numerous IAMCR e-mails or ECREA notices that fill my inbox. I was instead informed by an e-mail from a dear former colleague from the Dutch public broadcaster, NOS, who

had heard the sad news from EBU colleagues. In my first response to this sad news I described Karol as an intellectual giant. He was certainly that. I later received an e-mail written by Michael Tracey, who had forecast the end of public service broadcasting in Europe at the beginning of the 1990's when Karol was just entering the European arena to think loudly about the future of public service broadcasting. Michael called him a true public intellectual, referring to the definition of that provided by Wright Mills as a person who "confronts the facts with integrity, and integrity by doing some things about the facts." I couldn't have said it better. I would like to add, finally, that Karol was indeed an academic, a professional and a policy strategist, but always an intellectual and a visionary first of all.

In the sessions of the Public Media Policies Working Group during the recent IAMCR conference in Dublin in June, that I have chaired together with Leen d'Haenens, we have devoted a special session on the current EBU Vision 2020 project, that hopes to define a new way forward for public service media in Europe. During these discussions, completely in Karol's spirit as these are organised in cooperation with and enjoy the presence of EBU officials, I found myself wondering several times: what would Karol have said and contributed to this strategic discussion? In asking that question, in the simple fact that it came to mind so effortlessly, it is clear how much we already miss Karol's great intellectual contribution. He was a good man, a dear colleague and, above all, a brilliant scholar.